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Q&A: U.S. official tells of search for war criminals

Allan A. Ryan Jr. of the Justice Department's Office on Special Investigations on the case of Klaus Barbie, a former captain in the Gestapo.

Allan A. Ryan Jr. headed an investigation into the case of former Gestapo Capt. Klaus Barbie, sometimes called the "Butcher of Lyon," and his ties to the United States government. Barbie worked secretly for the U.S. Army's Counterintelligence Corps after World War II and escaped to Bolivia with the help of the CIC, even as France repeatedly asked for his extradition on war crimes charges. In February Barbie was expelled from Bolivia where he had lived in obscurity and was returned to France to stand trial for alleged war crimes in Lyon. On Ryan's recommendation, the United States apologized to France. Soon to leave the Justice Department's Office of Special Investigations, Ryan is writing a book on Nazis in America. He was interviewed by Washington Times staff writer Miles Cunningham.

Q: Do you have a ball-park estimate of the number of ex-Nazis in this country?

A: Nobody knows. I have seen estimates ranging from 200 to several thousand, but I don't think anyone knows. When you consider that 400,000 persons came here under the Displaced Persons Act from 1948 to 1952, to try to estimate how many of those had a background in persecution, let alone people who might have come in afterward, is really impossible. I would say roughly several hundred as opposed to several thousand.

Q: How many alleged Nazis has the Office of Special Investigations pursued?

A: We have 27 or 28 cases in court. We have about 200 cases under investigation, some of which will end up in court, others which will not, for lack of conclusive evidence. Since this office was started in 1979 we have investigated 800 to 900 cases.

Q: How many Nazis have been exported and or successfully prosecuted by the Justice Department?

A: We have won every case we have brought into federal court. It's really a two-stage procedure, if you're talking about naturalized citizens.

The first stage is to file charges in federal court seeking to revoke their citizenship. The other part of that is the full federal trial and all the appeals. I think our latest tally on that is 13 or 14 verdicts in federal court, all of which have been in our favor, and the appeals have been upheld.

The second stage is the deportation stage, which requires a second hearing in an administrative court. Of the five or six cases we have tried there, we have won. (Note: The federal government does not prosecute for war crimes.)

Q: Are any of these cases of the stature of the Barbie case?

A: Yes, we have several. One case involves a cabinet minister of what was called the Independent State of Croatia. We have a case we are concluding against Archbishop (Valerian) Trifa (of the Romanian Orthodox Church of America) who allegedly was one of the leaders of the Iron Guard in Romania.

Q: Who was the cabinet minister?

A: His name was (Andrija) Artukovic. He's now in California. He was ordered deported in 1953. The order was never carried out. We have any number of cases against people who took part in the shootings and killings of hundreds, thousands of people. We normally file eight to 10 cases a year. We have a list of 50,000 SS officers and concentration camp guards that was compiled by the Germans and we run those names through immigration files to see how many of them came to the United States. We've had a number of strikes from that list. Whenever we get a list from any source — a punitive battalion or concentration camp staff, or mobile killing units that were used on the Eastern Front — we check those names against immigration records. That's the beginning of it. It gives us a good start.

Q: Why in your judgment did it take this country so long to move in an organized way against Nazis hiding here?

A: It was only in the mid-1970s, when the House Judiciary Committee started holding hearings on the question, hearings that eventually led to the formation of this office, that the evidence came out that a substantial number of Nazi war criminals had come to the United States. I think there was an attitude, particularly during the 1950s, that communism was

the first great threat and people just didn't realize that many of the immigrants had a background in persecution. People thought that Nazism was

dead, that all the Nazis were in Germany.

Q: Is there a neo-Nazi organization in Germany today?

A: There are any number of neo-Nazi groups, like Odessa and so on. I don't think there's anything you can call a movement. People who survived the war are quite old now. I'm not an expert, but in other European and South American countries there are groups of sympathizers, people who are anti-semitic, very isolationist, politically more in tune with the Nazi movement than anything else.

Q: Including the American Nazis in this country?

A: I don't think they are a force in this country.

Q: Do you ever get useful tips from citizens?

A: Yes, sometimes they are helpful. Many times they are not.

Q: Did you ever talk to Barbie?

A: No. We wanted to, we asked the French to allow us. The French declined.

Q: We permitted them to interview him?

A: That's true.

Q: You are going to leave the department soon?

A: Yes. I'm going to leave at the end of this month. I think I will write a book about Nazi war criminals in the United States from a historical and legal viewpoint.

Q: Would you tell us about the book?

A: I'll start off by saying that I don't think there has been any book in this country that treats the subject as it should be treated. I think the whole story has never really been told in any authoritative sense. You've got to look at the history of it, how they came here, how they managed to get in, what they did after they got here, how this office was started, what was done to investigate and prosecute, some of the actual cases we tried, where the evidence comes from, the kind of people we're dealing with. I think you must address the legal, moral and ethical obligations involved. That's just never been done, that's what I hope to do.

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